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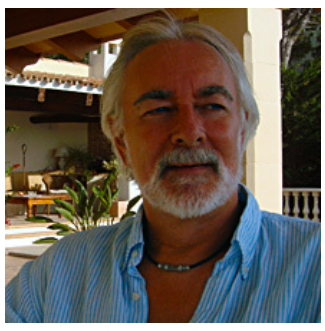
# A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: MARCH 2013

## LEGGO MY INTERNET



I got this tan from the servers, honest.

It seems as though the US and Russian governments have found something that they can agree on: there's too much internet freedom.

You may have heard about the much-hyped 'Internet Apocalypse' involving Spamhaus and Stophouse.com/Cyberbunker. My internet is fine, it never even slowed, neither did my Netflix service, etc…

But don't tell that to the BBC, New York Times or Russia Today. A massive, threatening, evil hacking event happened over the last few days– an event that we all have to be on guard against. While the Russians seem to side with the attackers, saying Spamhaus unfairly targets Chinese and Russian citizens, the BBC and the NYT choose to stir up the public with visions of a downed web. OMG. It'd be like 1989.

Now the voice of reason in all this is Gizmodo, right? I wish it were true, but Sam Biddle calls Spamhaus a "~~Dutch~~ European group", which is either sloppy reporting or a misdirection. Spamhaus has offices in London and Geneva, and the founder is a Brit called Steve Linford. (Read your link, Sam!)

So whoever pays for Gizmodo wants us to think that the 'Internet Apocalypse' is a Dutch tempest in a Dutch teapot; The Russians want us to believe the internet needs 'protection' but not by an Anglo-American firm; the Anglo-Americans want us to believe *they* should 'protect' the internet.

Spamhaus' 'Internet Apocalypse' was a sloppy UKUSA psy-op, aimed at scaring people into surrendering what little remains of their freedom of speech. The Russians are scrambling to make hay; I think that the Anglos have already realized their plan backfired and the Gizmodo article is an equally-sloppy smoke screen designed to distract people from a botched assault on their liberty.

Who the hell is Steve Linford?

Well, Wikipedia gives a glowing biography of Mr. Linford and an equally rosy description of his company. Strike one against him.

Mr. Linford, a Londoner who moved to Rome as a child, got his start in the Italian music biz working with big-time names like Ennio Morricone, Pink Floyd and Micheal Jackson. Linford is a wiz at music technology– sorta like Tom Dowd. This is what Linford's wiki says:

> *As computers began to be used in the music industry, Linford developed an interest in computer technology. In 1986 he moved to England where he set up a software company whose flagship product was a file-searching program called UltraFind for the Apple Macintosh similar to, but predating by many years, Apple's Sherlock.[2] With the arrival of the Internet Linford refocused the company in 1996 as an internet technologies company called Ultradesign Internet, around which he built a server hosting network called UXN.*
>
> *Finding that his customers were being harassed with junk emails, he sought ways to stop the problem and in doing so became an anti-spam campaigner. In 1998 he founded Spamhaus.*
>
> *With the support of the internet's major networks, Spamhaus started a real-time spam-blacklisting database used by governments, military networks, and two-thirds of ISPs (representing 1.4 billion email users around the world) who then began blocking billions of junk and virus emails from reaching internet users and this activity made Linford a target for cyber-criminals whose operations were crippled b*

> *Spamhaus. He received death threats from criminal spam gangs around the world, many of which were posted online.*[3]

My guess is that those "government, military networks" are not Russian government nor Russian military networks. (They're probably not Beijing's either, but those guys can be funny!)

Mr. Linford has been hailed as a "Top 10 Security Hero", one of the technical industry's "Top 50 Agenda Setters" by Silicon Magazine and he regularly debriefs governments, the European Parliament and the UN on security issues. Hmmm.

Now, Steve Linford lives the high life in Monaco, where (presumably) his internet is on the fritz.

3 COMMENTS

## MASTER AND MARGARITA

Encore!

There are very few books that I enjoy reading again and again, and my favorite of these is *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov.

This book was written in the 1930s, but published posthumously in 1967. M&M is such a ruthless satire of Soviet literary life that, to my knowledge, Bulgakov didn't even consider publishing it. Instead, he read it to friends over the course of a few dinner parties, then left the manuscript to molder in a drawer in his desk.

Before I go on, just a quick word about Bulgakov. He got his big break by dramatizing his novel *The White Guard* under the title *The Days of the Turbins*— the play was among Stalin's favorites and the dictator saw it several times, although Bulgakov never found a publisher for the novel during his lifetime. *The White Guard* is unusual in that it portrays a White Russian family in a sympathetic light. (The Soviet leadership fought the Whites during the Russian Civil War.) On top of that, the book was written less than a decade after the war ended.

To put that in perspective, can you imagine an off-Broadway play sympathetic to a Nazi family? Unlikely in the 1950s, unlikely today. And certainly not something any American leader would feel comfortable supporting. Probably the last time the USA had anything like *The White Guard* was *Gone with the Wind*, which was published 60 years after the American civil war ended.

So, Bulgakov began his career treading a thin line, and it wasn't long before he stumbled over to the 'wrong' side.

There are a couple of reasons why I like *The Master and Margarita*, the main one is that it deals with self-censorship and the role of writers in society. The crux of the story is that Bezdomnie, an up-and-coming propagandist in the fictitious writer's union "Massolit" (Lit for the Masses), learns that it is better for him not to write at all than to write something he believes is untruthful. Honesty, brutal honesty, is the hallmark of a worthy writer and that's not something that's going to make your professor/employer/dictator happy. Or at least, it won't make them happy for long.

Bezdomnie comes to this realization after being committed to a psychiatric hospital and hearing a fellow inmate, The Master, describe his novel about Christ and Pontius Pilate.

The forward material to my copy of M&M calls Bulgakov's interpretation of Christ's story an "audacious retelling"– the interpretation isn't audacious at all. It's an historically-informed account by an educated and worldly man. What makes Bukgakov's account so interesting is that Christ's life is portrayed against the power politics of biblical Jerusalem. The Romans rule in an uneasy alliance with the Temple; the Romans provide the administrative power and muscle, the rabbis serve a didactic role. Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Judea, hates his posting in backward Jerusalem and looks forward to returning to Ceasarea. While Pilate craves home, he craves peace and truth even more.

Christ is shadowed by a devoted indigent, Levi Matvei (Matthew), who tries to record everything that the prophet teaches. Christ feels antipathy toward Levi Matvei, because the former tax collector (unintentionally) garbles what Christ says, and therefore risks misleading the public.

The action starts when Kaifa, the chief rabbi, puts a bounty on Christ's head because the prophet undermines Kaifa's moral authority. Kaifa then puts pressure on Pilate to convict Christ of speaking against the state, something that Pilate is not convinced Christ did, but the procurator bends to Kaifa's wishes in the interest of maintaining order. Bending to Kaifa rankles Pilate, who then uses his secret service to kill Judas and drop the infamous 30 pieces of silver on the chief rabbi's doorstep. Pilate is haunted by Christ's words, particularly phrases like "man shall see the sun through clear crystal", and he seeks out Levi Matvei in an attempt to understand the prophet better.

Each of these characters is very well developed– reading this part of M&M gives me goosebumps. Levi Matvei and Pilate both want to ease Christ suffering and avenge his death, but Pilate has the ability and wit that Levi lacks. On the other hand, Levi has simplicity of spirit, which promises Heaven, while Pilate only hopes for peace.

Pilate understands the ramifications of what Christ taught better than the tax collector. When Pilate seeks Levi's companionship, Levi confuses kindness to Pilate for disloyalty to Christ; a mistake that the procurator easily sees through. While Bulgakov will not go as far as calling powerful men good, he believes that there is a humble place for them in God's plan.

Pilate's relationship with Afranius, the head of Pilate's secret service, is insightful. Afranius is motivated by the desire to be 'one step ahead' and please his superiors. Pilate flatters him at every turn, and even plays dumb on occasion. Because of this, Pilate can manipulate Afranius without the spy ever knowing that ideas are being planted in his head– in fact, Afranius believes that he is doing the manipulating! Even if you detest Pilate's methods, it's hard not to respect his skill as a political operator. Pilate is the sort of professional politician that we rarely hear about in the USA.

Now here's the important part: The Master, the modern chronicler of Christ's story, stands by his work even in the face of prosecution by Massolit. This tenacity earns him, and his witch-wife Margarita, eternal peace beside Pontius Pilate. Eternal peace, not Heaven.

Bezdomnie, our up-and-coming poet, is so struck by The Master's account of Pilate and what Pilate values, that he decides never to write poems again, because the poems he wrote– the poems that Massolit wants him to write– are "bad poems". Now Bezdomnie wants only peace and truth. He has become useless to the propaganda machine. Grammatisator.

I could go on about the layers of metaphor and satire that are woven together in this work, but that would be boring. Their beauty lies in how effortlessly all these threads meet. I will say that Bulgakov saw parallels between Kaifa's/Pilot's Jerusalem and 1930s Moscow: particularly in the foreign nature of the government. This may strike American readers as odd, and I will explain that parallel more in my next post, because it's an important facet to both Russian and US history.

Read the next post here.

LEAVE A COMMENT

## MAGIC

Now repeat after Harry…

Ever notice how magic spells are rhyming verse?

*Eye of newt, toe of frog,*

*Wool of bat, tongue of dog,*

*Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,*

*Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,*

*For a charm of terrible trouble…*

Or in the German from *The Brothers Grimm, Cinderella*:

*"Bäumchen, rüttel dich und schüttel dich,*
*wirf Gold und Silber über mich."*

*Little tree, rattle and shake yourself,*

*throw gold and silver over me.*

Or, from *The Fisherman and His Wife:*

> *"Manntje, Manntje, Timpe Te,*
> *Buttje, Buttje in der See,*
> *Myne Fru, de Ilsebill*
> *Will nich so, as ik wol will."*

This one's really hard to translate, and I've read that nobody knows exactly what "Timpe Te" means. (Maybe it's like abracadabra?) But here goes:

> *Little man, little man, "Timpe te"*
>
> *Fishy, fishy, in the sea,*
>
> *My wife who is called Isabel*
>
> *Wants something that I don't.*

And finally, my favorite. The fireside-song of magical Rumpelstiltskin:

> *"Heute back' ich, morgen brau' ich*
> *Übermorgen hol' ich der Königin ihr Kind;*
> *Ach, wie gut ist, daß niemand weiß*
> *Daß ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß'!"*
>
> *Today I bake, tomorrow brew,*
>
> *The day after I'll have the child of the queen,*
>
> *Ah! How good it is that nobody knows*
>
> *that I'm called Rumpelstiltskin!*

In their original languages, all of these spells rhyme and have a regular meter. That's important because there's something about rhyming and the regular rhythm of these poems that creates an air of magic around the action.

It's hard to find a scientific explanation for this, but I have a hunch that the answer lies in how the brain processes information. It's well know amongst cognitive scientists that the brain is designed to identify patterns in information and breaks in pattern. When patterns are strong, there seems to be some feedback, for instance, people unconsciously tapping their toes to music, or that annoying phenomenon "I just can't get this song out of my head".

And therein lies a golden nugget. Music, sound with pattern, seems to have an unusually engrossing effect on the nervous system. Poetry is musical language: good poetry has rhythm and melody. Poetry readings exist because the poem is most alive when it's read aloud. Therefore, you can't get away from the brain's rules for signal processing if you want listeners to enjoy your work.

What are these rules? Regularity and repetition. Brains like learning new things; but they also like predictability. Verse with consistent beat may not be fashionable, but it's the way to get people's attention. Rhyme is a pattern that reinforces the beat, just like beginning or ending a piece of music on the tonic.

In my opinion, the 'melody' of a poem is its relation to natural speech. (And therefore a culturally-specific phenomenon.) A poem is melodious if the arrangement of words flows as someone would naturally say them, with all the inflection, pause and stresses in their common, every-day place. More predictability!

Repetition. Two of the poems that I've listed are spells that are repeated several times throughout the story: *The Fisherman and His Wife*, and *Cinderella*. There's an added layer of predictability here, because the poem acts as punctuation to the story. The repeated-poem provides a higher order to the tale.

All this makes me have respect for translators. It's hard to translate well. Not only do you have to have an excellent command of both languages, but you have to understand both cultures. I also think that there are some things which are not translatable, at least, without being butchered beyond recognition.

So, my belief is that the 'magic' of these fairytale-spells comes from their regularity and therefore their appeal to our brains. Maybe this is why meetings and religious services often include music. Music focuses the listeners. And isn't that what you're supposed to do when you're practicing magic? Focus hard on what you want? Get other people to focus on what you want, repeat what you want and eventually, presto! Works well in classrooms and on T.V. too.

*Thanks to http://scarydoesntscareme.deviantart.com for the Potter image.*

LEAVE A COMMENT

PUBLIC TELEVISION

P Allen Smith and his latest juicer.

Julia Child's public television cooking show, *The French Chef*, is now for sale on Amazon. Well, folks, today I'm going to talk about public television.

Most of the programming on US public television is sponsored by companies, and therefore the shows push products. Quilting shows demonstrate crafts that you can make with the latest $50 attachment to your Brother (R) sewing machine; DIY home-improvement programs showcase gadgetry from The Home Depot (R); and you too can can cook like the professionals with…

I think you get my drift. I've stopped watching these public television programs because I find them depressing. Instead of presenting excellence in craftsmanship, PBS is now a publicly-funded version of QVC. American public television is supposed to be non-profit and educational; just like 'the news' programs that Jack Rebney fell in love with. Well, PBS isn't that anymore. How did we get here?

Back to Mrs. Child. Her show is actually quite good. She never pushes brand products, even the salt she uses has its label covered and "SALT' is scrawled across it in black pen instead. (She does say she prefers non-stick pans to traditional ones, and she did slip *once* and call a glass ramekin by its brand name Pyrex.) Her show went out of the way not to be commercial, but educational. It's great to watch.

But did Mrs. Child get her show because of her dedication to public education? Trick question! The answer is yes and no.

Mrs. Child was a highly trusted researcher for William Donovan, the man who Roosevelt made head of the OSS at the suggestion of William Stephenson. Stephenson was a Canadian who worked with the British to start America's secret service.* Mr. Child, Paul Cushing Child, worked with the US propaganda bureau (USIA) in its libraries and exhibitions department. His job after WWII was to stack French libraries in order to make sure no frogs had any anti-American thoughts.  Remember George Orwell?

> *All fiction from the novels in the mushroom libraries*
> *downwards is censored in the interests of the ruling class.*

When Orwell wrote this, he was writing about people like the Childs.

Paul quit the USIA in the early sixties because he felt that his rights had been violated when other US gov agencies queried him about his privileged friend Jane Foster. It's always amusing to me when propagandists cry "McCarthyism"!

So, two years after hubby's nasty little skirmish with anti-CIA-sponsored-lefties in Washington D.C., brahmins at Boston's PBS station gave Julia *The French Chef*, a platform for her book which was sponsored by Safeway supermarket.

Perhaps you see where I'm going. It's to Julia's, and her producers', credit that they showed some self-restraint and didn't milk her publicly-funded program for every advertizing dollar they could get. Actually, maybe that's to the public's credit, who I believe back then would have made a stink about non-profit or taxpayer's money being exploited by Safeway. Not anymore, it seems. Now nobody's distressed that advertisers have  colonized the public airwaves.

(Clarification: Boston's PBS station, WGBH, was primarily funded by the non-profit Ford Foundation until the USG took over Ford's funding responsibilities in 1967. The distinction between these two funding bodies is blurry, as even by the 1960s,  Ford had a history of stepping in where the USG couldn't be seen to tread.)

So yes, Julia did show genuine respect for public education. However, when you get your PBS show on the back of a corrupt organization– Julia's connections came from her time working at the OSS, and her lifestyle was at least in part subsidized by them– you open the door to all sorts of corruption. It's a steady downhill slide.

Why? Because organizations like the OSS and it's progeny only work when their members can be controlled, and therefore trusted, by the top brass. Controllable people are controllable because of their own

weakness and corruptibility: if you want a tight grip on somebody, get the dirt on them. Don't believe me? The first generation of OSSer's may look like the Childs, but the second will like the Bushes and the third like the Petraeuses (Petraeusi?). The venal self-selecting for the venal. Steady downhill slide.

You can make a strong case that the OSS (now CIA), NATO, State Dept. are not run for the benefit of the public good, but the narrow commercial interests of the ruling class. They are tools of commerce. If this is true of highly-trusted agencies which are supposed to attract the best and brightest (cough); it will certainly be true of your local public television station. Democratic governments aren't supposed to work that way, neither are pubic television stations.

America's managed democracy is maintained at the cost of her artistic, cultural and intellectual life. *The French Chef* may only contain a few malignant cells, but fast-forward to P. Allen Smith, and you have terminal cancer.

*Correction. This article originally read, "William Donovan, the Canadian etc." At Stephenson's suggestion, Roosevelt appointed Stephenson's friend, William Donovan, as the head of the US intelligence services.

It may also interest you to know that Julia's book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, was published by Alfred Knopf, which also published Roald Dahl's early work.

3 COMMENTS

# THE STRAW, THE COAL AND THE BEAN

Sometimes I feel like I just don't matter…

Now is the era of flash fiction. We've been trending shorter for about 100 years; starting with the novel, then modern novels, then short-stories and now 'flash fiction', which is usually 1000 words or less. Flash fits current reading styles and electronic media. It's perfect for the millennial attention span.

Not that flash fiction is new. It used to be called 'folk stories' or 'fairy tales'; and before that 'fables'. These stories were told by simple people around a hearth, or by slaves in the marketplace, while working folk scurried around them.

Fables are perfect for political subversion, as Aesop understood and paid for the hard way. Good flash presents little germs of ideas that are scattered in the mind, and that take root while you're shopping, working, sleeping… subconsciously.

Subconscious teaching. Just like with art or music therapy, flash fiction works best when you don't know that you're being "treated". Hence, preachy flash isn't going to be effective. Much better to disguise the message in an entertaining way. My example for this week is from the Brothers Grimm: *The Straw, The Coal and The Bean*— early flash fiction with a political bent. (And only 503 words long!)

Synopsis: a POOR woman cooks beans over a fire. She looses one BEAN, one STRAW and one COAL, who meet on the floor and complain about nearly being eaten, used as kindling and burned up, respectively. Countless numbers of their brethren have been exploited in the same way.

BEAN, STRAW and COAL decide to journey to a FOREIGN COUNTRY where bad things like dinner don't happen. On the way, the CUNNING straw gets burned up by the IMPETUOUS coal, both fall in to a stream and die. The PRUDENT yet FOOLISH bean finds this so funny, that she splits herself laughing, only to be revived by a COMPASSIONATE tailor, who gives her (and all her descendents) a Frankenstein-like black seam.

This is not a story told from the perspective of life's BEANS, STRAWS or COALS. It's not told from the perspective of the "poor" old woman, who feeds off of life's BEANS, STRAWS or COALS. ("Poor" is a red herring.) This story is told by somebody middle-management, who has the thankless task of organizing life's BEANS, STRAWS and COALS on behalf of POOR OLD WOMEN, who intend to devour them.

Anybody with a knowledge of German history in a wider European/Slavic context will understand why this story was told this way. It's a great story, which has just as much relevance to today's world, with all its globalization, as it had to the world of Catherine the Great, Vlad the Impaler or even during Roman times, since nobody really knows how old these stories are.

Because the story's told from a middle-management perspective, it

a propagates middle-management  point of view. The Bean, Straw, Coal and Tailor collectively represent typical peasant characteristics that a kindhearted overseer finds endearing and exasperating in equal parts. On the other hand, the Poor Old Woman is careless, single-minded and self-centered– she's one large, unseeing, stomach– which, frankly, is how the super-rich often come across.

I was tickled by the Bean's idea that things *must* be better in a different country. How many TV ads have I seen for "French Women's Weight Loss Secrets" or "Japanese buckwheat anti-compression pillows"? There's definitely a market for "the grass is greener".

So that's the political bent, why does the delivery work so well?

Of the 503 words, 180 are direct speech.

Every sentence drives the action further.

The story is told in the perfect past tense (only two instances of "was (verb)ing").

There are few adjectives, and when they are used, only one gets used at a time.

All these things show self-restraint on the part of the author, and a refined sense of how much info the listener can absorb.

Next week I'll write about the Brothers' use of verse to represent magic or ritual. That may sound dry, but it isn't.

LEAVE A COMMENT

## THE DAO OF SLUSH

I'm a slush-reader for a fiction magazine. In case this term is new to you, I read submissions first then send the best fits on to the editor. I wade through the 'slush pile' looking for that gem that is both well-written and in line with the magazine's spirit.

I volunteered to do this as part of my challenge to understand plot, and although I haven't been at it a long time, a few trends are beginning to emerge.

Firstly, there are many interesting story ideas.  I turn most of these away because the brilliance of the idea isn't matched by the *zing* of the writing. I slog through a fair amount of slightly-hackneyed characters, stilted dialogue and overburdened descriptions until I get to the end, when I realize that the author had an exciting idea, but didn't put the effort into execution that the idea deserves.

I'm not saying that any of these authors *can't* write zingy, just that in these particular instances they didn't. Every hackneyed element is a wasted opportunity. For me as a reader, I need a really striking image to engage me with the story, and it has to be associated with the protagonist. I can handle about three descriptions of random things before a) I need to know what's going on and b) I start to lose interest. IF the author uses up those three descriptions with cheap phrases like  "she was good-looking" or "he was a Harvard man", I may know where the author is going, but I'm not going to be excited about it.

I write this with humility, because I fall into the same trap. I remember being so excited by an idea that I just wanted to get it out there, when deep down I knew that the writing needed more work.

Roald Dahl warded off sloppy descriptions by keeping a journal of visceral images. The little book is full of nasty visions of scab-picking, cruel culinary practices and macabre tidbits. He'd employ these images as necessary in his stories. So while Dahl would use 2-D characters, the way he described them is anything but flat.

How does one write zingy-er? According to Dahl, the key is rewrite, rewrite and rewrite again. The more times you tell a story, it becomes clear which are the key elements. Put the artistry around key elements and drop everything else.

Looking back, what I've passed on to the editors isn't the work with the most original story-lines, but the work with the most polished delivery. After about 200 words, I need to feel like I would pay to read the story in order for me to send it up. If I don't feel like paying to read the rest, well, why should I expect a subscriber to?

The second trend may be a little more controversial. Overburdened sentences. (OR run-on sentences.) It's very easy to lose the reader in long sentences, which you write, yet may not reread the next day, like a baby sparrow hopping from branch before he finally decides to fly, and which finally end. I'm joking a little with that last sentence but my point is serious. I only have so much energy. Please, pick the necessary stuff and get to the point. I respectfully acknowledge that many of the better writing programs encourage long, poetic sentences.

I'd really like to see the wacky ideas with polished delivery, so if I ever do reject YOUR work, I'd be happy to read a rewrite.

*With thanks to goodeveningherrgoethe.blogspot.com for the photo.*

LEAVE A COMMENT



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